



## Phenomenology of Spirit

*Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel , A.V. Miller (Translator) , John Niemeyer Findlay (Foreword)*

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**Phenomenology of Spirit** Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel , A.V. Miller (Translator) , John Niemeyer Findlay (Foreword)

This brilliant study of the stages in the mind's necessary progress from immediate sense-consciousness to the position of a scientific philosophy includes an introductory essay and a paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of the text to help the reader understand this most difficult and most influential of Hegel's works.

## Phenomenology of Spirit Details

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## From Reader Review Phenomenology of Spirit for online ebook

### Thea says

My friend Ching-In who made me join Goodreads said that I should honestly list my books, which is why this one is on my shelf. I normally don't talk about it in public for fear that people will think I'm a snot. But I really loved this book. I've never identified so much with a writer before, and also, even though this book is essentially impossible to read, my friend Georg really is a super genius.

The thing that fascinated me most about this book is how much Hegel wanted to believe that everything happened for a reason. He wanted so desperately to believe that, that he invented this immense, intricate and slightly loopy system of thought with its own freaking language.

I mean, even if you hate the book, you have to admire that kind of commitment.

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### Bradley says

It would take a lifetime to really absorb the full impact of this majestic work. Hegel was brilliant and I believe this is his best contribution to metaphysics. His basic argument is that instead of thinking about human existence as somehow reduced down to pure physicality; or material form of say the body, we can begin to see how human existence moves progressively towards "pure spirit" or essentially absolute mind. History moves in a teleological, purely progressivist fashion, steadily becoming ever-so freer, ever so developed, and he argues in many places that humans are gradually, incrementally over many centuries, perhaps millennia, towards a transcendence of their animal nature and into pure reason. We are not quite there yet, and there are several passages that hint at the fact that it will take an incredible exertion of will, desire, and intelligence to get to that point, but that human history will transcend animal instincts, and become "pure spirit" or self-consciousness, self-mastery, and self-reliance, unbounded from the muck and rancorous desires that keep us tied to the misery and petty-infighting of this world. After studying Deleuze and co. for several years, it is refreshing to finally see someone who still believed in transcendence. Ha! What an outmoded raconteur. I love it!

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### Manny says

### Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Writing a Review of Hegel's Phenomenology is a fool's errand.....

Here's a famous passage you should always hold in mind when you get to thinking that Hegel's all dry=humourless (spiritless?[!!]) dry-as-bone abstraction.

[Miller's page 210] [...] the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination [Organs des Pissens]. The infinite judgement, *qua* infinite, would be the fulfilment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgement that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as urination [als Pissen].

. I.e., "Pissen", not "Urinieren, the old dusty school=Latin ; Harris commenting, "Academic dog-Latin belongs to the old world of spiritual authority. In the 'daylight of the present' even philosophic science must speak the language of the people." Then his *endnote* (which is not a *footnote*), "I was amused to discover that the *N.E.D.* [I don't know what this is] calls Findlay's super-professorial use of 'micturition,' for urination, *erroneous*. His substitution of 'orgasm' for Hegel's 'generation' [...] is philosophically 'erroneous' also, but it led Alan White to the insightful comment that the 'I=I' of primitive Self-Consciousness is a philosophical orgasm." I think Joyce would've much enjoyed this little passage.....

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Writing a Review of Hegel's Phenomenology is a fool's errand. As the contemporary reviewers probably indicate. So, here's a fun quip ::

You all know the thing about how Johnson refuted Berkeley ::

After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the nonexistence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it -- "I refute it thus."

Add to this Hegel's refutations of Physiognomy and Phrenology thusly ::

[page 193 in Miller] Lichtenberg [...] also says this: 'If anyone said, "You certainly act like an honest man, but I see from your face that you are forcing yourself to do so and are a rogue at heart"; without a doubt, every honest fellow to the end of time, when thus addressed, will retort with a box on the ear.' This retort is to the point, because it refutes the primary assumption of such a 'science' of mere subjective opinion, viz. that the reality of a man is his face, etc. The *true being* of a man is rather his deed; in this the individual is *actual*, and it is the deed that does away with both aspects of what is [merely] 'meant' to be [...]

Etc. And the refutation of phrenology gets even more violent. Viz.

[Miller's page 205] When, therefore, a man is told 'You (your inner being) are this kind of person because your skull-bone is constituted in such and such a way,' this means nothing else than, 'I regard a bone as *your reality*. To reply to such a judgement with a box on the ear, as in the case of a similar judgement in physiognomy mentioned above, at first takes away from the *soft* parts their importance and position, and proves only that these are no true *in-itself*, are not the reality of Spirit; the retort here would, strictly speaking, have to go the length of beating in the skull of anyone making such a judgement, in order to demonstrate in a manner just as palpable as his wisdom, that for a man, a bone is nothing *in itself*, much less *his* true reality.

Etc. So, the lesson is, should someone tell you that The Phenomenology is about some disembodied spirit, you oughta, well.... please though, don't behave too violently towards them.

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Terry Pinkard has newly translated the Phenomenology and is apparently looking for a publisher. Meanwhile he's provided his translation [HERE](#), including a bilingual download option, for public use. Thank you, Professor.

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### **Jacob Hurley says**

Thorough summary of human history. Favorite parts were his evaluation of philosophic history from Stoicism to rationalism, his account of the beautiful soul, and the section about religious art.

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### **Erik Graff says**

Henri Mottu was a visiting French-Swiss professor of philosophy at Union Theological Seminary who taught a course on Hegel which I took owing to my interest in Kant and Marx and the word on campus that he knew Kojeve. The class was small, the readings consisting primarily of the Phenomenology and Kojeve's Introduction to the Reading of Hegel. It was very well taught, the discussions were exciting and I was inspired to go on and read a lot more by and about Hegel.

Hegel's contribution to Kantian idealism is his addition of an historical dimension. In other words, categories, frames of reference change. In Hegel's view this process occurs both objectively in nature and in history and subjectively in the process of self-education. That actually understates the enormity of his claim, for Hegel seems not only to be saying that there is change, but that this change is evolutionary and progressive.

Thus, in its broadest acceptation, the Phenomenology of the Spirit may be taken as a description of how the cosmos becomes conscious of itself, of the self-realization of what he terms "the Absolute Idea"--something like the old hellenistic notion of the divine Logos.

This self-actualization of the Logos has both an aetiological and a teleological dimension. On the one hand, he presumes to demonstrate how human history may be represented as an upward-moving, inclined spiral or vortex. Each stage is a sort of historical category and each, in its fullest achievement, takes up all that came before, raising it to a new, more universal level. This is the aetiological aspect of causality. On the other hand, the very ideas of Reason and of Universality or of God or Truth and the mystical apprehension of them lead and inspire the individual, even a whole people, towards their realization. This is the teleological dimension.

It is not difficult to understand how some can be very intrigued by this system which seems to promise so much--everything in fact--and to suggest that the student of it is in some sense a servant of the Absolute. Hegel certainly writes with such confidence and spirit that one often feels oneself to be sharing with him some sort of beatific vision whereby all becomes pregnant with meaning and signification.

I pursued this dream for years, never quite believing in it, but intrigued nevertheless. More on that later...

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### **K says**

I actually read almost all of this. I would like a cookie.

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## John says

G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is one of the densest, most profound, and influential works in Western philosophy. It is also, at points, one of the most incomprehensible books I have ever read. About half way through this nearly 600-page book, I thought to myself, "There is no way that I am going to be able to finish reading this!" I did finish it, however, and it was well worth while.

*Phenomenology of Spirit* is notoriously difficult for a number of reasons. This book was, first of all written in a rush and delivered to the publisher without revision. Second, it is written in a "continental" style that pays little attention to clarity of argument. In order to tolerate Hegel's writing, I found that I had to become comfortable with following the rhythms of his thinking rather than worrying too much about formal argumentative structure. However, one of the most major reasons why this book is difficult to understand is because it deals with very difficult philosophical issues. Difficult ideas sometimes just require difficult language.

The book is an attempt to think through the unfolding of the history of world consciousness from beginning to end. Hegel uses the German word *Geist* in order to designate the substance of the universe. *Geist* is an ambiguous term that has been translated into English as both "mind" and "spirit." The idea is that the universe is a conscious, living substance that unfolds and grows the way that an organism grows. In the Preface (which, by the way, offers the most clear and concise summary of the ideas in the book), Hegel likens the universe to a plant that sprouts forth and progressively overcomes its early manifestations in order finally to produce a flower, which is the plant's ultimate goal and purpose.

The "flower" of *Geist* is what Hegel terms "the absolute idea." This is the point at which *Geist* comes to fully understand itself. The universe is like a mind that has become self-alienated, according to Hegel, and the history of thought represents the universe's attempt to return to self-consciousness. Over the course of the book, Hegel traces out the convolutions that *Geist* manifests as it reflects upon itself and struggles to come to terms with its own essence.

Perhaps the most famous and influential section of the book describes the master/slave dialectic. This is one of the early junctures in the unfolding to *Geist*. It occurs when a mind reflecting upon itself comes to value the sort of recognition and identity that it achieves through self-reflection. As a result, this mind seeks out other minds in order to see itself reflected in the consciousness of others. However, in so doing, this mind inaugurates a "life and death struggle." When two consciousnesses come into contact with one another, they struggle for domination and control, according to Hegel. One mind becomes the master and the other becomes the slave. The irony is that in mastering another mind, the master reduces it to a kind of property that is less than human, and so no longer capable of furnishing the sort of recognition that the master desires. The slave, on the other hand, in becoming enslaved, is forced to work and to creatively alter the world. It, thus, incorporates part of the master mentality into its essence and becomes transformed into something more than just a slave; it becomes a worker.

This example illustrates an ongoing dialectical process that governs the unfolding of all reality, according to Hegel. This process is one in which opposite forces come into conflict, but instead of simply contradicting one another, they instead become synthesized into something more than the sum of their parts. Over the course of the book, Hegel multiplies examples from the history of consciousness, showing the various ways the world's struggles have contributed to the forward movement of history. History, it turns out, is an

ongoing synthesis of various conflicts, all of which are inevitably leading to the full self-consciousness of *Geist*. Once *Geist* has come to understand itself, history (as conflict) comes to an end in the freedom of self-understanding.

Hegel worked out the details of his dialectical logic in other books, but the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is where he first showed how this logic plays itself out in the unfolding of the world's history. The influence of Hegel's vision has been enormous, stretching from his own lifetime to ours. Karl Marx applied the Hegelian dialectic to his analysis of class conflict; existentialist thinkers adopted much of Hegel's terminology in order to describe the unfolding of lived, human existence; psychoanalytic thinkers incorporated Hegel's views on conflict into their understanding of human consciousness; and political thinkers have applied Hegel's ideas to the relationships between nations and ideologies.

Though it was a slog to get through, in completing this book I feel as if I have read something incredibly substantial, important and profound. The world looks different after seeing it through Hegel's perspective.

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### **Richard says**

What does this Hegel guy think he is? Some kind of philosopher or something?

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### **Erick says**

I had started this book some time ago and put it down and didn't pick it back up until recently. I decided to start it over from the beginning since it had been a while since I had picked it up. Also, since I had just gone through most of the primary works of Fichte and Schelling, I thought I would be in a better position to gauge the merits of the work in the greater context of German Idealism.

This book was supposed to be an introduction to Hegel's system as a whole, and as such, it is often discursive; covering a number of facets of his system throughout. I really didn't find the work that difficult to understand. Hegel has a tendency to reiterate the main features of his system regularly; even to the point of redundancy. His system owes much to Fichte, just as Schelling's did. Not all points are analogous to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but the overall groundwork is definitely Fichtean. As I said in the reviews of Schelling, Fichte is the true originator of German Idealism. Fichte's dependence on Kant was largely negative; meaning, it is almost a response against Kantianism -as Kant clearly understood, as gauged by his critique of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Schelling and Hegel's dependence on Fichte, however, is largely positive; meaning, much of their thought stemmed directly from Fichte's system. One could use an analogy such as all three systems shared the same tree trunk, although the branches may be disparate between them.

Hegel, like Fichte, starts with the notion of the absolute I, or self. It is related, though distinct, from the conscious I/self. The conscious self remains alienated from the absolute self. Only through a particular process of the unfolding of spirit/mind does the conscious self come to be acquainted with the absolute self. These aspects of the absolute self's posited existence are occasionally termed "moments" in this translation, but also seem to be analogous to all facets of conscious subjective experience. One could liken Hegel's system of phenomenology to digital snapshots that together form a continuous whole. His absolute self occasionally doubles as "wesen" (a very complicated German term), which acts as a kind of substrate. The substrate, or "wesen", would be the medium all the snapshots are found in. Spirit/mind is the very process of movement through these snapshots that characterize their unfolding and manifested content. This process

reads as a sort of ontological ambivalence between subjectivity/objectivity, individuality/universality etc, where various aspects are posited, unfolded and transcended in various ways. According to Hegel, distinctions in the process of phenomenology are canceled and/or transcended. It is interesting that Hegel criticized Schelling for doing away with distinctions in his system, when clearly the ultimate end of distinctions in Hegel's system are to be canceled as well, or at least completely sublimated, which would mean the same thing. It seems that Hegel sees his difference from Schelling in the fact that they are canceled through process. I think it makes no difference in the end, however.

There is definitely some aspects of Hegel's system I find interesting, although one must admit that much of it was found either implicitly or explicitly in works published before him. One of the major issues with the work is the ambiguity of certain German terms. The most notable is the German term "geist", which can either be translated as "spirit" or "mind". Hegel purposefully utilizes the ambiguity in order to impart both religious and philosophical meaning to his system. It's not hard to see what Kierkegaard disliked about Hegel. I share much of Kierkegaard's antipathy towards certain aspects of Hegel's system. There is no question that as a whole Hegel promotes a kind of collectivism. Individuality and subjectivity are seen as the ground of evil in the world and exist only to be sublimated into a kind of objective universalism. While Hegel occasionally attempts to keep both subjectivity and individuality as important "moments" in his system, they are ultimately to be canceled and done away with. It's hardly any wonder that Kierkegaard emphasized the two things that Hegel worked so hard to de-emphasize. Also, Hegel's system is gnostic in the most literal sense of the word. His notion of spirit is essentially conflated with his notion of absolute knowledge (erkennen). Knowledge is emphasized throughout, faith hardly at all. The indifference to faith was shared by Fichte as well. Both mention it in passing but it is certainly not an essential part of their pseudo-religious philosophy; it is simply one very inconsequential aspect in their respective systems. It's also not hard to see how one can go from a philosophy that doubles as religious ideology, to a theosophy that doubles as philosophy (e.g. Steiner and Anthroposophy). Kierkegaard saw the dangers in over-intellectualizing matters of faith. I indeed agree with him that Hegelianism is more an exercise in thought than an exercise in spirit. As philosophy it's interesting, as theology it's flawed. Much of his system that may have been inspired by religious ideas originally, could be easily reworked for things that have nothing to do with faith at all. Certainly, many new Hegelians (e.g. Marx) saw the potential in Hegelian dialectic for purely atheistic and secular ends. One must intuit that the system itself is not overly dependent on Christianity or theism as such. It should be noted as well that just as in Fichte, Hegel blurs the lines between his notion of absolute self and God. There is nothing that suggests that they are essentially different, or at least, not enough in the system itself to prevent them from being conflated easily. One could substitute the absolute self for God, just as one can substitute mind for spirit in Hegel's system. I seriously doubt that Hegel would intend this as such, but it seems very possible to do without it affecting the system itself in any profound way.

This translation was by J.B. Baillie, an English idealist. He attempted to present the phenomenology as a system compatible with the Christian faith, which I am sure Hegel wouldn't have been opposed to, although, there are glaring discrepancies between the two. I am glad that I read Baillie's translation rather than a newer one. This book, as an early 20th century English translation, is entirely relevant for understanding English Idealism, which makes it far more appropriate for someone who is interested in the history and progression of philosophy in general and idealism in particular. The book that I have has regular typos that are rather annoying in some parts.

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## Fug o' Slavia says

Absolutelyunbelievable banter from start to finish, Hegel's inimitable wit and heart of gold really shine through here! You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll do both at the same time!

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## Gary says

I have never have read a better written book then this one. Hegel's style of writing reflects the way I process and think. It was one of the few books where I could only listen to for only half of my daily two hour bike ride. I would get overwhelmed with what was being said and would have to switch my mind off and listen to something else on my return ride.

The 'how', the method the author uses to explicate, is the reason why I love this book as much as I do. He relates an abstract to a notion then to a concept and stays away from the doing and our actions when he gets at what he means by Being. He'll explicitly contrast Being with truth, man (all people), becoming, world, actuality, thought or ought. When I'm forced to interact with people, I do my best to stay away from talking about what others have done, or the sports teams they love, or the politics they have, or where they have been, but I always try to bring the conversation to Being, the nature of truth, or the meaning of our existence, or to use the language from this book the essence or reality.

Hegel can not stand relativism, but he really likes Parmenides and his 'One' (one can tell he likes him by how he starts his book with Parmenides). The essence is in the existence and existence is necessary for Hegel. In this book, Hegel doesn't directly say the Being is the "indeterminate immediate" (he'll do that in "Science of Logic"), but does hint at it and will say things equivalent to that statement. He's dancing around Spinoza in that both say there is a single substance and many attributes (infinitely many with Spinoza) and is using the formulation that 'every determinate is a negation' since for Hegel we live in an infinite and eternal universe. This is how he gets at Being from nothing. Hobbes, for examples, says that the moral is relative to what the individual believes is good and pleasurable or what is bad and needs to be avoided therefore he would be called a relativist. Locke, for example, will say there is an intrinsic good and bad within us that needs to be discovered through rational thought and God as revealed by nature or divine revelation therefore he would be called an absolutist (or 'realist'). With the 'One' as the only substance and as Karl Popper has pointed out, you'll get the block universe of Einstein and time will be an illusion (and everything has happened with certainty already) and the only moral truth would be relativistic like a Hobbes, but Hegel gets around this by invoking his dialectic which invokes 'the insistence of existence' as Caputo would say in his book, "The Insistence of God".

The Being from nothing or in the language of Hegel, the in itself and the for itself (the subjective and objective) only becomes aware of itself when it is for itself then it loses its in itself. He'll use self-conscious and conscious and at times he'll introduce a third item with alienation that leads to a for itself for another. Oddly, Sartre gets this part of Hegel very well as outlined in his book "Being and Nothingness" and in his play *Huis Clos* ("No Exit"). I say oddly because Sartre is not really a deep philosopher ("Pierre is not a waiter, he is just acting like a waiter", "don't be a girl, get up and be a man", or "there are no homosexuals there are only homosexual acts", or just try to read his last last section of his book and try to make sense out of his existential psychology).

There are five relationships that Hegel plays with and he definitely gets to play around with the ambiguity within the time period because 'spirit' and 'mind' where the same word. 1) Within the self there is the 'self conscious' and the 'conscious', 2) within the family or the community, there is the between you and me, 3) the us and the them, 4) the community and the nation, and 5) and all of the first four relationships across time.

There is no here and there our Being just is. He doesn't use the word Bayesian but he's got the concept. Everything that contributes to our essence is based on how we experience the now based on our prior beliefs as they relate to our expectations as we weigh them appropriately according to our likelihoods. The nearer we get to something the further away we are in our understanding until we resolve the antithetical with the thetical by the synthesis of the two. Hegel seemed to have a model that would fit into a quantum universe (a universe made up of packets of energy, quanta) that have discrete steps and gets resolved through stepping through a large Monte-Carlo (but deterministically derived random numbers, look it sounds like a contradiction, but ultimately all random number generators are deterministic except, perhaps, for those that rely on quantum effects) computer simulation. Of course, he can't talk like that since that would be anachronistic.

Hegel really leveraged himself off of Kant, but I don't think he mentioned Kant directly or if he did it was only in passing. Kant would say 'the thing in itself' and the 'thing as it appears to an observer' (Noumena or Phenomena) and Kant puts our morality into intrinsic duty. Hegel accepts our separation from truth but resolves it with his dialectic, a syllogism that appeals the universal to the particular and the general to the specific. "Cigarettes cause cancer, but we never say that a particular cigarette cause a particular person's cancer". Kierkegaard in Anxiety will say something along the lines that "the particular is not the universal and the universal needs the particular, or Adam is not the race but each man is a member of the race. Every man is different but yet we think of them as part of a race or as humanity. Each individual is only like the others but is not the others. Adam, the first man, or what we call a man, is part of the race". Hegel does his best in squaring the circle and resolving the paradox that is inherent in our understanding of the Being of truth.

My favorite book for 'what' is told is "Being and Time". A whole lot of that book (especially Division I) is contained in this book. The spirit (Hegel's word), that which "is in itself and for itself and aware of itself", that is in the world through one of the five relationships itemized above is that which keeps us from becoming our authentic selves and are own most non relational selves, 'everyone is the other and no one is himself'. Heidegger after B&T finds a place for the thought between the thoughts, or what he calls the 'ontological difference' that which lies between the being in itself and the being for itself. Heidegger will say that metaphysics ended with Hegel. It takes Heidegger after B&T before he changes his emphasis from 'dasein', that which takes a stand on its own understanding, and the 'meaning of being' into being as presence, or truth as what is. Similar to St. Thomas Aquinas as shown in his Selected Writing, or very similar to the way Hegel does in this book.

Hegel will end this book on science as spirit. Therefore, he would say science does think and does know itself. Heidegger never gets to that point, but everything Heidegger wrote about had to do with the problems, the essences and the limitations of science (Mehta says that in "The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger"). Does science think and know itself? or not? You decide, but before you do I would recommend this book and then Heidegger's "Being and Time".

Review first time I read book:

This is the single best Audible book I've ever listened to. I've tried reading "Phenomenology of Spirit" through out various times during my life, and like most people I couldn't get past the first two pages. This audio version brings magic to this perfect work of art.

All summaries or short commentaries on this book get it wrong. Everything you think you know about this book is probably wrong. There's no way to understand it except for actually listening (or reading) it. Furthermore, from now on I'll look askance at any statement that starts "Hegel says....".

I had just listened to "Soul Machine" by Makari (a book I liked very much, but it reads somewhat like an encyclopedia), and he ends his story with Hegel and I was intrigued by what he had to say about this book. On a lark, I decided to listened to the sample of "Phenomenology" that audible provides. I had never listened to an audio book sample before. I realized from the 3 minute and 24 second sample exactly what Hegel was trying to say and I actually understood what he was saying! I strongly recommend listening to the sample, and see if it makes sense to you.

I came to listening to philosophy by way of running out of science books and Great Course lectures. Most of the popular science books I've been listening to lately just seem to repeat themselves (or worse yet, they enter the world of Deepak Chopra's Woo Woo land).

To me, listening opens up a gateway for which reading doesn't always allow. I'm not suggesting that this book is an easy listen. It's not. Almost everyday, I take a two hour bike ride onto isolated desert roads, and I almost never could process more than an hour of this book at a time. I had to rest my mind. The reading of each paragraph number helped me immensely since I knew when a paragraph had ended and a new thought was starting. There is a strong abstract nature to this book where the author will relate an abstract to another abstract before he goes to the concrete.

There's a certain magic the author employs in his writing technique. Mathematics is the study of the changeless, and at its core it is at most a collection of items which get their meaning from the relationships which they each have with each other. This is how the author will think about the Universal of Absolute Being. It's important to realize that for the author the group of the individual species which make up the genus can only be understood from considering the genus as a whole. Or in other words, it's not the collection that gives understanding but it's the totality.

This is the exact opposite approach for which Heidegger uses in "Being and Time", he thinks understanding the parts that make up the whole provides for understanding (or using his nomenclature, gives an ontological foundation). Heidegger's book is actually my favorite book overall, but unfortunately I had to actually read it since there isn't an audio version, but there is an excellent lecture by Hubert Dreyfus freely available on Itunes. But, I like "Phenomenology" as much as I do because in the end there aren't truths but only perspectives, and Hegel gives a fabulous perspective.

I would actually suggest listening to these three Great Courses and this fictional book all available on Audible before listening to "Phenomenology". Great Courses: 1)Science Wars, 2) Philosophy of Science, and 3) Redefining Reality, and the fictional book, "The Signature of All Things", by Elizabeth Gilbert. I'd recommend the book because it's one of the best fictions I've read, and it illustrates Hegel's belief that any determination gives negation (one can paint a rose by painting everything but the rose or just as beautifully by only painting the rose and ignoring everything else).

The Great Course lectures speak loudly on the foundation of science and the nature of knowledge. Themes

Hegel elaborates on significantly. Hegel's perspective is to think of our place on the "earth" (his expression) as "universal, necessary, and certain" as opposed to particular (to the data), contingent (dependent on outside factors), and probable (not certain). I recently listened to "A Beautiful Question" by Frank Wilczek, and "To Explain the World", by Steven Weinberg each a Nobel Prize Winner in physics. The first book, favors Hegel's perspective. The world is understandable as a whole (the atoms which make up our world are 'emergent properties' of the mathematics which describe them). The second book favors Heidegger, the parts that make up the whole are understandable. (Our understanding is defined by how science describes and explains based on the contingent ideas derived from particular observations).

At the time this book was written German did not have a word for 'mind' therefore any translation must take a viewpoint whether the author meant 'mind' or 'spirit'. Hegel starts the book by considering the mind within the individual, and then the spirit between individuals, and then he will go across time for both the individual and the groups (at the core of understanding for any stochastic process there are only two independent variabilities, 'within' and 'between').

When Hegel says 'objective spirit' as a thing, I took it to mean a culture with a world view. The "idle chatter", the items that make the social norms, and the items that come from outside of us, and the things that make us the they ('inauthentic' using Heidegger's word) within ourselves and between ourselves. Hegel will say the alienation we have within us and between us gives us our true knowledge.

He really seems to get Godol's incompleteness theorem (all formal systems are incomplete and have true items not provable), the Copenhagen Interruption (the measurement problem due to the wave/particle duality), Heisenberg Uncertainty Principal (knowledge of one thing means lack of knowledge elsewhere), and his teleological system is more Darwinian than not (hence it's not really teleological). Obviously, he doesn't use modern language when he describes those things, but I as a listener I read my own interruption into what the author was saying.

I noticed in the first half of the book, the author really seemed to have a wry sense of humor and sprinkled it through out the book. He'd say stuff like "it's been said in Latin and bad Latin at that" or paraphrasing 'if someone says they can tell you that you behave erratically from bumps on your head, you should box them on the ears', or 'it's like when a naughty boy gets boxed on his ears for being obnoxious, it's exactly what the boy wanted'.

I enjoyed the 6 hour commentary attached to the book. It made me realize I was understanding the book fairly closely. It's possible to be completely non-religious and be overwhelmed by the author's methodology. He'll demonstrate the problem with faith (I'd be fairly certain that Kierkegaard and his 'leap of faith' come from this book). Our duties which come from our own selfishness can lead to ethical behavior in society as a whole (the author definitely seems to embrace Mandeville and his "Fable of the Bees"). He ends the book with religion within nature and then segues quickly into the truth (certainty) of systematic science.

The book is probably not what you think it is. It is definitely not "impenetrable". The author explains, amplifies and provides a grounding for what he is saying. There are many ways to look at and understand this book. I do it from a philosophy of science point of view. I like books that take me out of my comfort zone and open up a whole new world for me. I suggest listening to the sample and see if you get what he's saying. If you do, get this book. If not, but you're still intrigued, I would suggest the lectures and book I referenced above.

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## David M says

12/28/2016 - this book has been weighing heavy on me for a long time. This past week I ended up forcing my way through the last 300+ pages with, I fear, more haste than wisdom. I'm anxious to be done with Hegel for the sake of moving on to Marx.

Do I have much insight? No, not really. Rumors of the book's barbaric syntax and inhospitable decor turn out to be 100% justified. I normally get a lot of pleasure from reading philosophy, but can't say I found much here.

Of course personal enjoyment is a pretty useless criterion when trying to evaluate a book like this.

I think I'm able to see in what way Hegel represented an advance in philosophy. Consider Descartes with, first, his conception of the subject as an isolated, thinking consciousness and, second, his dualism of substance; Kant would later reproduce both tendencies in his more sophisticated and elaborate form.

From this we get the scandalous problem of solipsism as well as the strange aporias of mind and matter, the noumenal and the phenomenal.

Hegel did not exactly solve these problems (they are, sort of by definition, insoluble), but he may have pointed to a way out for philosophy. He did this by bringing in the crucial categories of mediation and totality. He helps us to conceive a matter that is already pregnant with mind (and vice versa), as well as a thinking subject that is not isolated but collective.

Now, as far as I can tell, he does not really complete this project. The Phenomenology is still far, far too abstract. Which is why it's not enough to simply interpret the book; it needs to actually be *applied*, to history and to our collective life as human beings. This is where Marx comes in.

(Although it's also probably true that Hegel can serve as an important corrective to the later tendency of Marx and Engels to try and erect a deterministic science of history; a philosophical engagement with concepts is always important to prevent the calcifications of scientism)

And while I strongly, strongly recommend Kojève's classic book on the subject (Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit), I can't accept Hegel's teleology of history. Humanity reconciled to itself through the ruins and monuments of its own alienation... don't fucking count on it.

\*

When Spirit is at first conceived of as substance in the element of pure thought, it is immediately simple and self-identical, eternal essence, which does not, however, have this abstract *meaning* of essence, but the meaning of absolute spirit. *Only Spirit is not a 'meaning' is not what is inner, but what is actual.* - pp 464-65, paragraph 769

This passage may be aimed at Spinoza. In Spinoza's metaphysics, God-the-eternal-substance can be grasped through pure thought, eternal reason, an inner representation by the thinker. By contrast, with Hegel Spirit is *actual*, which I take to mean empirical and historical. Moreover, reason itself is historical, and the philosopher must come to know his or her own place in history. No longer shall they withdraw from the

world into a realm of pure reason; rather thinking must happen in and through the world and its history.

However, there does seem to be a massive irony here. Hegel may break down barriers by indicating a space through which history can enter philosophy. And yet his own philosophy, or at least *this-fucking-book*, is virtually without content, totally denuded of the world. It's really quite ghastly, to be honest.

\*

'I got entangled in my own data, and my conclusion directly contradicts the original idea from which I start. Starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism.' - the social theorist in Dostoevsky's *Demons*

While he's always rather stingy about naming names, Hegel seems to be accusing Kant of something similar in the section 'Absolute Freedom and Terror' (pp 355-64). The point being that the terror of the French Revolution was the natural culmination or real-world application of Kant's philosophy of pure practical reason.

For Kant, freedom is entirely unworldly. The will is noumenal, the world phenomenal. The result is a very harsh dualism. The individual conscience is absolute in its demands.

By contrast, Hegel understands the importance of mediation. Freedom is embodied in institutions and social bonds. In this respect he clearly appears to be an advance over his predecessor. A pure conscience is not going to save the world. For that, some form of collective identity is necessary. However, it seems as though Hegel's understanding of the collective is often such as to simply rehabilitate the existing order. Here is where it may be necessary to turn to Marx in order to theorize a collective subject that is at once emerging, critical, revolutionary.

\*

The attack on phrenology - on the one hand, this just seems amusing, since after all *no one* takes that seriously anymore, but then I think Hegel's point is much broader. Phrenology may be an especially absurd example, but its fundamental error is the same as any positivist would-be science of psychology, in assuming that consciousness is a thing that can be neutrally observed.

...consciousness no longer aims to *find* itself *immediately*, but to produce itself by its own activity. It is *itself* the End at which its action aims, whereas in its role of observer it was concerned only with things. - pp 209, bottom of paragraph 344

Insofar as consciousness acquires a nature, insofar as it aspires to the status of a thing, this is due to its own activity *qua* consciousness, rather than some determinate objective reality.

Mediation, mediation, mediation. This is the key to it all

\*

Never forget,

*The truth of the master's consciousness is the servile consciousness of the slave*

(page 117, paragraph 193, paraphrasing somewhat)

\*

'Thus it is only sense-certainty as a *whole* which stands firm within itself as *immediacy...*' (pp 62)

(Compare Merleau-Ponty: It is possible to doubt any particular thing in the world can be doubted but not the world as a whole.)

The dialectic is already present in the most simple act of perception. And what is the dialectic? Mediation or the work of the negative maybe, the self-exceedingness of consciousness/knowledge. Sense data, claimed as the most concrete basis of knowledge, is really the most abstract as it posits an artificial experience as real.

Chapter III of 'Consciousness,' 'Force and the Understanding,' this is a bit more opaque to me. Hegel seems to turn from the empirical model of sensation/perception to Newton's nomological physics:

'The Unification of all laws in *universal attraction* expresses no other content than just the *mere Notion of law itself*, which is posited in that law in the form of *being*.' (pp 91)

Here too Hegel seeks to show that consciousness can not be kept out. Subjectivity keeps transgressing on objective being.

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### **Seth says**

In this debut novel, the multi-talented Georg Hegel gives an edge-of-your-seat, no-holds-barred, rip-roaring ride through the dark and mysterious caverns of the criminal mind. This romp-em-stop-em tale traces the journey of a strapping, curious, yet fickle young man named Spirit (Geist in the original German) as his godlike intelligence leads him from the rough-and-tumble, animalistic mean streets of an unknown Caribbean island, through the French Revolution, to the clean and well-ordered cities of present-day Japan. (For a fuller account of the book's enigmatic conclusion, plus some alternate endings and commentary, see Alexandre Kojève's stunning compendium.) Many readers may know Georg Hegel as a humble high-school teacher and occasional babysitter, but make no mistake: Hegel is a masterful storyteller. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (popularly called P.O.S.), he thrills us with the twists and turns of a deeply complex character's development, stopping on the way to wow us with fights-to-the-death, to illuminate the perils and attraction of religious fanaticism, and even to weigh the pros and cons of arcana such as phrenological metaphysics and systematic racism. Like so many of our best novels, Hegel's narrative is of course completely implausible, yet even when the story stretches the bounds of believability, its constant movement from one point of view to another—followed so often by a graceful synthesis of the two—makes Hegel's P.O.S. one of the best reads of 2007.

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### **???? says**

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## Roy Lotz says

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is easily the most controversial of the canonical philosophers. Alternately revered and reviled, worshiped or scorned, he is a thinker whose conclusions are almost universally rejected and yet whose influence is impossible to escape. Like Herodotus, he is either considered to be the Father of History or the Father of Lies. Depending on who you ask, Hegel is the capstone of the grand Western attempt to explain the world through reason, or the commencement of a misguided stream of metaphysical nonsense which has only grown since.

A great deal of this controversy is caused by Hegel's famous obscurity, which is proverbial. His writing is a great inky cloud of abstractions, a bewildering mixture of the pedantic and the mystic, a mass of vague mysteries uttered in technical jargon. This obscurity has made Hegel an academic field unto himself. There is hardly anything you can say about Hegel's ideas that cannot be contested, which leads to the odd situation we see demonstrated in most reviews of his works, wherein people opine positively and negatively without venturing to summarize what Hegel is actually *saying*. Some people seem to read Hegel with the attitude of a pious Christian hearing a sermon in another language, and believe and revere without understanding; while others conclude that Hegel's language plays the part of a screen in a magician's act, concealing cheap tricks under a mysterious veil.

For my part, either dismissing or admiring Hegel without making a serious attempt to understand him is unsatisfactory. The proper attitude toward any canonical thinker is respect tinged with skepticism: respect for influence and originality, skepticism towards conclusions. That being said, most people, when confronted with Hegel's style, will either incline towards the deifying or the despising stance. My inclination is certainly towards the latter. He is immensely frustrating to read, not to mention aggravating to review, since I can hardly venture to say anything about Hegel without risking the accusation of having fundamentally misunderstood him. Well, so be it.

*The Phenomenology of Spirit* was Hegel's first published book, and it is widely considered his masterpiece. It is a history of consciousness. Hegel attempts to trace all of the steps that consciousness must go through—Consciousness, Self-Consciousness, Reason, Spirit, and Religion—before it can arrive at the point of fully adequate knowledge (Absolute Knowledge). Nobody had ever attempted anything similar, and even today this project seems ludicrously ambitious. Not only is the subject original, but Hegel also puts forward a new method of philosophy, the dialectical method. In other words, he is trying to do something no one had ever thought of doing before, using a way of thinking no one had thought of using before.

The *Phenomenology* begins with its justly famous Preface, which was written after the rest of the book was

completed. This Preface alone is an important work, and is sometimes printed separately. Since it is easily the most lucid and eloquent section of the book, I would recommend it to those with even a passing interest in philosophy. This is where Hegel outlines his dialectical method.

The dialectical method is a new type of logic, meant to replace deductive reasoning. Ever since Aristotle, philosophers have mainly relied on deductive arguments. The most famous example is the syllogism (All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, etc.). Deduction received renewed emphasis with Descartes, who thought that mathematics (which is deductive) is the most certain form of knowledge, and that philosophy should emulate this certainty.

The problem with syllogisms and proofs, Hegel thought, is that they divorce content from form. Deductive frameworks are formulaic; different propositions (all pigs are animals, all apples are fruit) can be slotted into the framework indifferently, and still produce an internally consistent argument. Even empirically false propositions can be used (all apples are pineapples), and the argument may still be logically correct, while failing to align with reality. In other words, the organization of argument is something independent of the order of the world. In the generation before Hegel, Kant took this even further, arguing that our perception and our logic fundamentally shape the world as it appears to us, meaning that pure reason can never tell us anything about reality in itself.

Hegel found this unsatisfactory. In the words of Frederick Copleston, he was a firm believer in the equivalence of content and form. Every notion takes a form in experience; and every formula for knowledge—whether syllogistic, mathematical, or Kantian—alters the content by imposing upon it a foreign form. All attempts to separate content from form, or vice versa, therefore do an injustice to the material; the two are inseparable.

Traditional logic has one further weakness. It conceives of the truth as a static proposition, an unchanging conclusion derived from unchanging premises. But this fails to do justice to the nature of knowledge. Our search to know the truth evolves through a historical process, adopting and discarding different modes of thought in its restless search to grasp reality. Unlike in a deductive process, where incorrect premises will lead to incorrect conclusions, we often begin with an incorrect idea and then, through trial and error, eventually adopt the correct one.

Deductive reasoning not only mischaracterizes the historical growth of knowledge, but it also is unable to deal with the changing nature of reality itself. The world we know is constantly evolving, shifting, coming to being and passing away. No static formula or analysis—Newton's equations or Kant's metaphysics, for example—could possibly describe reality adequately. To put this another way, traditional logic is mechanistic; it conceives reality as a giant machine with moving, interlocking parts, and knowledge as being a sort of blue-print or diagram of the machine. Hegel prefers the organic metaphor.

To use Hegel's own example, imagine that we are trying to describe an oak tree. Traditional logic might take the mature tree, divide it into anatomical sections that correspond with those of other trees, and end with a description in general terms of a static tree. Hegel's method, by contrast, would begin with the acorn, and observe the different stages it passes through in its growth to maturity; and the terms of the description, instead of being taken from general anatomic descriptions of trees, would emerge of necessity from the observation of the growing tree itself. The final description would include every stage of the tree, and would be written in terms specific to the tree.

This is only an example. Hegel does not intend for his method to be used by biologists. What the philosopher observes is, rather, Mind or Spirit. Here we run into a famous ambiguity, because the German word *Geist*

cannot be comfortably translated as either “mind” or “spirit.” The edition I used translates the title as the *Phenomenology of Mind*, whereas later translations have called it *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This ambiguity is not trivial. The nature of mind—how it comes to know itself and the world, how it is related to the material world—is a traditional inquiry in philosophy, whereas spirit is something quasi-religious or mystical in flavor. For my part, I agree with Peter Singer in thinking that we ought to try to use “mind,” since it leaves Hegel’s meaning more open, while using “spirit” pre-judges Hegel’s intent.

Hegel is an absolute idealist. All reality is mental (or spiritual), and the history of mind consists in its gradual realization of this momentous fact: that mind *is* reality. As the famous formula goes, the rational is the real and the real is the rational. Hegel’s project in the *Phenomenology* is to trace the process, using his dialectic method, in which mind passes from ignorance of its true nature to the realization that it comprises the fabric of everything it knows.

How does this history unfold? Many have described the dialectic process as consisting of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The problem with this characterization is that Hegel never used those terms; and as we’ve seen he disliked logical formulas. Nevertheless, the description does manage to give a taste of Hegel’s procedure. Mind, he thought, evolved through stages, which he calls “moments.” At each of these moments, mind takes a specific form, in which it attempts to grapple with its reality. However, when mind has an erroneous conception of itself or its reality (which is just mind itself in another guise), it reaches an impasse, where it seems to encounter a contradiction. This contradiction is overcome via a synthesis, where the old conception and its contradiction are accommodated in a wider conception, which will in turn reach its own impasse, and so on until the final stage is reached.

This sounds momentous and mysterious (and it is), but let me try to illustrate it with a metaphor.

Imagine a cell awoke one day in the human body. At first, the cell is only aware of itself as a living thing, and therefore considers itself to be the extent of the world. But then the cell notices that it is limited by its environment. It is surrounded by other cells, which restrict its movement and even compete for resources. The cell then learns to define itself negatively, as against its environment. Not only that, but the cell engages in a conflict with its neighbors, fighting for resources and trying to assert its independence and superiority. But this fight is futile. Every time the cell attempts to restrict resources to its neighbors, it simultaneously impedes the flow of blood to itself. Eventually, after much pointless struggle, the cell realizes that it is a part of a larger structure—say, a nerve—and that it is one particular example of a universal type. In other words, the cell recognizes its neighbors as itself and itself as its neighbors. This process then repeats, from nerves to muscles to organs, until the final unity of the human body is understood to consist of one complete whole, an organism which lives and grows, but which nevertheless consists of distinct, co-dependent elements. Once again, Hegel’s model is organic rather than mechanic.

Just so, the mind awakes in the world and slowly learns to recognize the world as itself, and itself as one cell in the world. The complete unity, the world’s “body,” so to speak, is the Absolute Mind.

Hegel begins his odyssey of knowledge in the traditional Cartesian starting point, with sense-certainty. We are first aware of sensations—hot, light, rough, sour—and these are immediately present to us, seemingly truth in its naked form. However, when mind tries to articulate this truth, something curious happens. Mind finds that it can only speak in universals, which fail to capture the particularity and the immediacy of its sensations. Mind tries to overcome this by using terms like “This!” or “Here!” or “Now!” But even these will not do, since what is “here” one moment is “there” the next, and what is “this” one moment is “that” the next. In other words, the truth of sense-certainty continually slips away when you try to articulate it.

The mind then begins to analyze its sensations into perceptions—instead of raw data, we get definite objects in time and space. However, we reach other curious philosophical puzzles here. Why do all the qualities of salt—its size, weight, flavor, color—cohere in one location, persist through time, and reappear regularly? What unites these same qualities in this consistent way? Is it some metaphysical substance that the qualities inhere in? Or is the unity of these qualities just a product of the perceiving mind?

At this point, it is perhaps understandable why Hegel thought that mind comprises all reality. From a Cartesian perspective—as an ego analyzing its own subjective experience—this is true: everything analyzed is mental. And, as Kant argued, the world’s organization in experience may well be due to the mind’s action upon the world as perceived. Thus true knowledge would indeed require an understanding of how our mind shapes the experience.

But Hegel’s premiss—that the real is rational and the rational is real—becomes much more difficult to accept once we move into the world of intersubjective reality, when individual minds acknowledge other minds as real and existing in the same universe. For my part, I find it convenient to put the question of the natural world to one side. Hegel had no notion of change in nature; his picture of the world had no Big Bang, and no biological evolution, and in any case he did not like Newtonian physics (he thinks, quite dumbly, that the Law of Attraction is the general form of all laws, and that it doesn’t explain anything about nature) and he was not terribly interested in natural science. Hegel was far more preoccupied with the social world; and it is in this sphere that his ideas seem more sensible.

In human society, the real is the rational and the rational is the real, in the sense that our beliefs shape our actions, and our actions shape our environments, and our environments in turn shape our beliefs, in a constantly evolving dialogue—the dialectic. The structure of society is thus intimately related to the structure of belief at any given time and place. Let me explain that more fully.

Hegel makes quite an interesting observation about beliefs. (Well, he doesn’t actually say this, but it’s implied in his approach.) Certain mentalities, even if they can be internally consistent for an individual, reveal contradictions when the individual tries to act out these beliefs. In other words, mentalities reveal their contradictions in action and not in argument. The world created by a mentality may not correspond with the world it “wants” to create; and this in turn leads to a change in mentality, which in turn creates a different social structure, which again might not correspond with the world it is aiming for, and so on until full correspondence is achieved. Some examples will clarify this.

The classic Hegelian example is the master and the slave. The master tries to reduce the slave to the level of an object, to negate the slave’s perspective entirely. And yet, the master’s identity as master is tied to the slave having a perspective to negate; thus the slave must not be entirely objectified, but must retain some semblance of perspective in order for the situation to exist at all. Meanwhile, the slave is supposed to be a nullity with no perspective, a being entirely directed by the master. But the slave transforms the world with his work, and by this transformation asserts his own perspective. (This notion of the slave having his work “alienated” from him was highly influential, especially on Marx.)

Hegel then analyzes Stoicism. The Stoic believes that the good resides entirely in his own mental world, while the exterior world is entirely devoid of value. And yet the Stoic recognizes that he has duties in this exterior world, and thus this world has some moral claim on him. Mind reacts to this contradiction by moving to total Skepticism, believing that the world is unreal and entirely devoid of value, recognizing no duties at all. And yet this is a purely negative attitude, a constant denial of something that is persistently there, and this constant mode of denial collapses when the Skeptic goes about acting within this supposedly unreal world. Mind then decides that the world is unreal and devoid of value, including mind itself as parts of

the world, but that value exists in a transcendent sphere. This leads us to medieval Christianity and the self-alienated soul, and so on.

I hope you see by now what I mean by a conception not being able to be acted out without a contradiction. Hegel thought that mind progressed from one stage to another until finally the world was adequate to the concept and vice versa; indeed, at this point the world and the concept would be one, and the real would be rational and the rational real. Thought, action, and world would be woven into one harmonious whole, a seamless fabric of reason.

I am here analyzing Hegel in a distinctly sociological light, which is easily possible in many sections of the text. However, I think this interpretation would be difficult to justify in other sections, where Hegel seems to be making the metaphysical claim that all reality (not just the social world) is mental and structured by reason. Perhaps one could make the argument on Kantian grounds that our mental apparatus, as it evolves through time, shapes the world we experience in progressively different ways. But this would seem to require a lot more traditional epistemology than I see here in the text.

In a nutshell, this is what I understand Hegel to be saying. And I have been taking pains to present his ideas (as far as I understand them) in as positive and coherent a light as I can. So what are we to make of all this?

A swarm of criticisms begin to buzz. The text itself is disorganized and uneven. Hegel spends a great deal of time on seemingly minor subjects, and rushes through major developments. He famously includes a long, tedious section on phrenology (the idea that the shape of the skull reveals a person's personality), while devoting only a few, very obscure pages to the final section, Absolute Knowledge, which is the entire goal of the development. This latter fact is partially explained by the book's history. Hegel made a bad deal with his publisher, and had to rush the final sections.

As for prose, the style of this book is so opaque that it could not have been an accident. Hegel leaves many important terms hazily defined, and never justifies his assumptions nor clarifies his conclusions. Obscurity is beneficial to thinkers in that they can deflect criticism by accusing critics of misunderstanding; and the ambiguity of the text means that it can be variously interpreted depending on the needs of the occasion. I think Hegel did something selfish and intellectually irresponsible by writing this way, and even now we still hear the booming thunder of his unintelligible voice echoed in many modern intellectuals.

Insofar as I understand Hegel's argument, I cannot accept it. Although Hegel presents dialectic as a method of reasoning, I failed to be convinced of the necessary progression from one moment to the next. Far from a series of progressive developments, the pattern of the text seemed, rather, to be due entirely to Hegel's whim.

Where Hegel is most valuable, I think, is in his emphasis on history, especially on intellectual history. This is something entirely lacking in his predecessors. He is also valuable for his way of seeing mind, action, and society as interconnected; and for his observation that beliefs and mentalities are embodied in social relations.

In sum, I am left with the somewhat lame conclusion that Hegel's canonical status is well-deserved, but so is his controversial reputation. He is infuriating, exasperating, and has left a dubious legacy. But his originality is undeniable, his influence is pervasive, and his legacy, good or bad, will always be with us.

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## **Jesse says**

Before you get overawed by his reputation, its worth remembering that a healthy portion of philosophers, especially in the English speaking world, think that Hegel wrote a lot of nonsense, and its historical influence, in my opinion, is not overwhelmingly positive. I've been suspicious of it ever since I wrote what I thought was a fairly dubious paper on its first section and yet still got an A on it. A lot of the prose reads like some sort of Burroughs-esque prank. Most contemporary analytic philosophy thinks early philosophers were too ambitious in gaining elaborate knowledge through reason alone, but Hegel seems to think they basically weren't ambitious enough. Essentially, if you channeled the rationalists through a megalomaniac, you might get something like this.

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## **Ian "Marvin" Graye says**

### **THE TRIBULATIONS OF A PROTO-POST-HEGELIAN PAGAN HEGEL-BASHER**

For the purposes of this undertaking, my accomplice DJ Ian and I (I and I) faked our way through reading DC Hegel in English and German (English translation courtesy of Terry Pinkard) with the aid of diverse comic strips, annotations, opinionators and unreliable narrators:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSdHo...>

**The Professor:** *"If you don't read 'Phenomenology of Spirit' in German, you will never understand Hegel, let alone Zizek."*

**DJ Ian:** *"But I don't read German...OK, I will get myself a big fucking dictionary...Then I will get back to reading Zizek as soon as possible. All of my reading schedule is dedicated to reading Zizek for the next three years."*

**The Professor:** *I trust you're going to read Zizek in Slovenian?*

### **GRATUITOUS ADVICE AVAILABLE FOR THE FREE**

#### **Bertrand Russell**

*"The worse your logic, the more interesting the consequences to which it gives rise!"*

#### **Slavoj Zizek**

*"One is thus tempted to say, 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted Hegel. The point [however] is to change him.'"*

#### **Anonymous GoodReader**

(view spoiler)

## THE INTERPLAY OF UNDERSTANDING AND CRITICISM:

*"It is not the worst reader who provides the book with disrespectful notes in the margin."*

Theodor W. Adorno

## A PREFACE TO A CRITIQUE OF THE PHENOMENOLOGY:

### **The Resurrection of Hegel**

Hegel has enjoyed a resurgence of interest and popularity at various times over the last 80 years.

Much of the philosophy that appeals to me personally couldn't have been achieved except on the shoulders of this giant.

Some of this later philosophy endorses aspects of Hegel, some rebels against it, some adapts it.

Reading this work was part of an exercise in understanding why. What insights did he have, and why do they appeal?

Did his philosophy achieve any unique truth or version of the truth or approach to the truth?

For me, ultimately, Hegel is just as much a point of departure as a point of arrival or destination.

### **When They Begin the Beguine**

You have to wonder whether, in many cases, the appeal and embrace of Hegel's philosophy derives from his use of language, just as much as the concepts.

To this end, I've tried to approach reading Hegel from both a philosophical and a literary point of view.

Like the name and lyrics of the song, "*Begin the Beguine*", part of the appeal of Hegel's work for me is that it's so beguiling!

Let's pause for some Ella, to show you what I mean:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boJ2R...>

### **Towards the Negation of the Novation**

From a literary point of view, Hegel is a terrible writer whose work does its best to defy any attempt to distil it down to some great sentences and phrases and/or some great ideas.

The extent to which these ideas are Hegel's ideas or unique to him or just a response to or tweaking of the

ideas of others before him is for historians of philosophy to judge.

Hegel's work itself doesn't expressly acknowledge or cite the sources of the arguments to which he is responding. It's assumed that we are familiar with them.

It's like an enthusiastic undergraduate term paper completed under pressure of a self-imposed deadline (the imminent battle of Jena and conquest of Prussia). By the time pen meets paper, the 36-year old Hegel embraces them as the foundation of his ideas, but neglects to expressly acknowledge his inspiration and sources. Ultimately, like the embrace of his acolytes, his work and its system is a triumph of assertion.

As a result, a comprehension of Hegel is just as needing and deserving of annotation and secondary material as Joyce and Pynchon.

### **Towards the Negation of the Ovation**

At an individual sentence level, Hegel is not always difficult, just mostly. He seems to throw multiple sentences at the reader, without necessarily communicating or effectively helping readers understand the sequence of his arguments. When it comes to Hegel's sentences, the difficulty results from the untamed collective, not the disciplined individual.

Still, within the rush or barrage of sentences, some sentences and phrases inevitably stand out.

The quality of these sentences, or their pregnancy, occasionally, with a meaning that is hard to divine, are the source of much of his appeal.

Indeed, it helps Hegel's case that they are so difficult to divine. Like God, it is not for us to fully comprehend his ways or his words. We are just supposed to trust them both. They appeal to our credulity and need to believe.

### **Towards the Negation of the Negation**

Many of Hegel's sentences and (catch-)phrases sound good, even if at first you don't really know what they mean.

The one phrase or catchphrase that most appeals to me personally is "*the Negation of the Negation*".

Engels said that the Negation of the Negation is:

*"A very simple process, which is taking place everywhere and every day, which any child can understand as soon as it is stripped of the veil of mystery in which it was enveloped by the old idealist philosophy."*

I've tried to set out my understanding of it in My Writings here:

<https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

## **Let's Pretend**

To understand and appreciate Hegel, it helps if you pretend that you're God.

### **God Makes Sense, If You Can Believe It**

1. And so God took a part of his mind and his soul,
2. And where there was nothing, he made Man.
3. And he gave part of his mind and soul to Man.
4. And, lo and behold, Man did verily exist.
5. Still, though God had lost a part, he was still whole.
6. And while Man had gained a part, he too was whole.
7. And God and Man together made a whole.
8. And where there should have been two wholes, there was only one.
9. Man ascended to his feet, and looked around.
10. But there was no thing for him to see.
11. So God made other Life for Man.
12. And Man had Objects to look at and eat and desire.
13. Each Object contained a little part of God.
14. And when Man looked at an Object, he saw a part of God.
15. And that part of God was also a part of Man.
16. So when Man looked at an Object, he also saw himself.
17. Thus it was that Man was at one with the Object.
18. And Man was at one with God.
19. And verily Man understood this.
20. And so it was that Man made sense.
21. Out of what God had given him.

## In Which God, Enraged, Goes Forth, Consumes and Returns [A Jena Fragment in Hegel's Own Words]

- "1. God, become Nature, has spread himself out in the splendor and the mute periodicity of his formations,*
- 2. Becomes aware of the expansion, of lost punctuality and is engaged by it.*
- 3. The fury is the forming, the gathering together into the empty point.*
- 4. Finding himself as such, his essence pours out into the restlessness and inquietude of infinity,*
- 5. Where there is no present,*
- 6. But a wild sallying forth beyond a boundary always reinstated as fast as it is transcended.*
- 7. This rage, in that it is a going forth, is the destruction of Nature.*
- 8. The going beyond the formations of Nature is in effect likewise an absolute falling back into the self, a focal return.*
- 9. In doing this, God, in his rage, consumes his formations.*
- 10. Your whole extended kingdom must pass through this middle-point, this focality;*
- 11. And by this your limbs are crushed and your flesh mashed into liquidity."*

## HEY! WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

### Safeguarding the System

Hegel purports to construct a system of philosophy that is both comprehensive and self-contained.

Hegel and his adherents guard it preciously. [Forgive me, if I refer to Hegel and his adherents interchangeably.] As a result, it's difficult to criticise the System, without evoking responses that you haven't really read or understood Hegel or that you have inaccurately paraphrased him.

To be honest, I think any reader has to proceed regardless, if you're going to make the effort to read Hegel at all.

### An Invitation to Heretics

Even if you sympathise with Hegel, like any dogmatist, he invites or attracts heresy. No purpose is served by agreeing or disagreeing with every tenet of his philosophy willy-nilly. There's no point in setting out to be an acolyte or an apostate. Readers should feel free to dismantle the System and save what they can. After all, this is what the Young, Left Hegelians did in the wake of his death.

### Detection or Invention?

One problem with Hegel is that he pretends that his System is a detection of what is present in nature, that it is the result of discovery, not the product of invention on his part.

As a result, it purports to be factual and real. If you disagree with it, then supposedly you are flying in the face of reality.

This rhetorical strategy is disingenuous. Of course, he created his System, no matter how much of it is based on or modified from the work of earlier philosophers. Of course, we have the right to submit it to scrutiny, to attempt to prove it right or wrong.

If Hegel pretends that he deduced his philosophy from first principles, then he is not being truthful. If he pretends that he discovered a method in the workings of nature and history, but reckons that he does not apply that method or any method in his own philosophy, then he is playing with semantics.

### **An Aversion to Critique**

Hegel is just trying to make his subjective pronouncements critique-proof or un-critiquable. A reasonable enough goal, if it is confined to enhancing the robustness of his own pronouncements, but you can't deny readers the right to attempt a critique. That is one way guaranteed to alienate an audience, to split a following and push potential advocates away. Which is what happened, inevitably, after his death.

What I mean by this is that I don't accept that Hegel arrived at all aspects of his philosophy after a process of deduction. [Not that I'm saying anybody could have achieved this.]

### **On Having Faith in the System**

I don't disagree with Hegel's attack on Empiricism, for example. However, to the extent that he asserts that Consciousness is part of Spirit, a God, then I don't accept that he has necessarily proven the existence of God or that the Spirit of God plays a role in the process of individual human thought or reason. Thus, it seems that Hegel's System, which I assume is supposed to be rational, is built on an act of faith in the belief of God.

I accept that social, rather than spiritual or religious, factors play such a role. For example, I accept that we differentiate between objects, partly if not wholly based on our capacity for language. Language is a social construct. I don't necessarily accept that it is intrinsically spiritual. I also don't want to embrace any ideas that approximate to some hyped-up politico-cultural concept of Volk or the People.

I suspect that Hegel started his philosophical deliberations with a religious-based preconception, in particular, a belief in a monotheistic God, and that he integrated it into his philosophy.

### **On Questioning the System**

To the extent that Hegel's System is a hierarchy that works its way up to the pinnacle of God, there are a number of questions that I, an Atheist, feel should be asked:

Does the entire System fall, if you don't believe in God?

Alternatively, is his System modular and severable, so that you can salvage parts that appeal to you? If the latter, which parts? And to what extent are those parts solely attributable to Hegel? Are they equally components of other philosophies, whether pre-Hegelian or post-Hegelian?

To some extent, my way of approaching and questioning Hegel might owe a lot to the approach of those Left Hegelians who happened to be Atheist.

In the absence of a belief in God, it must also take into account the approach of more materialist philosophies like those of Feuerbach, Marx and Engels (and subsequent Marxists).

### **Spirit Made Flesh**

Of course, an atheist has to accept the possibility that Hegel might be right in believing that there is a Christian God (in his case, Lutheran), and that everything else potentially follows.

If it turns out that monotheism is right, then Hegel's philosophy seems to come close to a belief that all of Nature derives from God and that humanity, in particular, is Spirit made Flesh. Presumably, Nature is also Spirit made material.

Working backwards or upwards from Flesh, the ultimate destination must therefore be Spirit (even if Flesh is preserved).

I'll leave open for the moment whether Spirit might actually be any more than Energy. Hegel certainly regards it as the repository of Absolute Knowledge. Thus, it seems that, for him, it must be conscious and intelligent. It also appears to transcend each individual, even though it embraces every individual. It is a composite or unity of differences or opposites.

### **Fear of Contradiction**

For me, what seems to sit at the heart of Hegel's philosophy is contradiction. This is the contradiction between different objects, whether consciousnesses or not.

For each of us, for each Subject, every other consciousness or thing is an Object, one that contradicts us. Just as I am me, I am not you, and I am not it, that object.

In my mind, this is simply a recognition of difference. Practically and socially, I don't see these observations as the foundation of opposition, conflict or contradiction.

I don't know whether this is a matter of translation. However, I witness a lot of conflict and antagonism between Subject and Object in Hegel. I haven't yet worked out why difference is not enough.

In other words, why isn't it enough that perception and language allow us to differentiate between things, consciousnesses, Subjects and Objects?

Why isn't it enough that language is a social system of signs that enable us to identify, think about and discuss difference.

Why is it somehow implicit that this Object exists at the expense of this Subject or Object? Why is everything "set against" everything else in perpetual contradiction?

Are two strawberry plants in a garden really opposed to each other? Do they battle each other for nutrients? Is their ostensible rivalry really such a big issue in their life? Are two rocks sitting at the bottom of a stream any different?

## Consciousness and Self-Consciousness

It's possible that some or all of the contradiction happens within the consciousness or mind.

Consciousness detects the outside world of nature, grasps it and drags it into the mind. The Subject consumes or ingests the Object, where it begins to relate to or play with it. It's almost as if the mind is an enormous database of images and responses that are preserved intact. They are ingested, but not digested or integrated into something new and different.

It's possible that the dialectic doesn't posit a synthesis because within the database both thesis and antithesis continue to exist. Subject to illness, loss of memory and death, nothing in the mind ceases to exist.

Self-consciousness is the awareness that this process is occurring. However, Hegel also regards self-consciousness as desire itself.

## The Hegelian Paradox: From the Inquisitorial to the Inquisitional

The ultimate Hegelian Paradox is that the Philosophy is based on contradiction, yet the Philosopher [and his acolytes] will brook no argument.

The System is founded on the adversarial, yet disagreement is heresy (even if the Philosophy by its very nature seems to invite or attract heresy).

Similarly, it is reluctant to accept that a rational philosophical process or method is being utilised. It is enough to look, seek and ask questions. The answers are there waiting for us to find them. Truth and understanding will result from the only method that is necessary, an inquisitorial process. If you ask [God], you will be answered [by God, if not reason].

Still, the normal outcome of an inquisitorial process is a decision. In Hegel's Philosophy, it is not a human decision, but a divine revelation. Once revealed, it can't be questioned. It can only be respected, observed and enforced.

Hence, as is the case with all heretics, the sectarian non-believer attracts the attention of the Inquisition.

Hence, Hegel embraces both the Inquisitorial and the Inquisitional, having constructed both a System and an Institution.

It's up to us to determine whether to take a vow to Hegel or whether simply to do good.

The choice is ours to Begin the Beguine.

*"And we suddenly know  
What heaven we're in,  
When they begin the beguine."*

## SOUNDTRACK:

### **Tindersticks - "Let's Pretend"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DniLm...>

*"Let's not make it into a big thing*

*Let's not get lost in this*

*I know it is, I know we could*

*I guess we surely would*

*"Let's pretend it's not*

*It doesn't mean a thing*

*Let's not blow it out of all sense*

*As though it meant so much*

*"It's always thought about for weeks*

*Not every time your lips meet mine, I think of her*

*But when her hands reach out, I think of you."*

### **Tindersticks - "Let's Pretend" [Live]**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0N\\_X...](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0N_X...)

### **Ella Fitzgerald - "Begin The Beguine"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boJ2R...>

### **"The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman"**

*"The fair Beguine, said the corporal, continued rubbing with her whole hand under my knee -- till I fear'd her zeal would weary her...*

*'I would do a thousand times more,' said she, 'for the love of Christ'...*

*In saying which she pass'd her hand across the flannel, to the part above my knee, which I had equally complained of, and rubb'd it also.*

*I perceived, then, I was beginning to be in love..."*

In the absence of Corporal Trim's Beguine, here is the undoing of Uncle Toby:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lDgkA...>

## **MORE DETAILED REVIEW AND CRITIQUE**

## **Part I: The Dialectic and the Negation of the Negation**

<https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

## **Part II: Consciousness and Self-Consciousness**

<https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

## **Part III: Master and Slave**

<https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

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### **Benjamin says**

This should really be getting both a 1 and a 5.

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### **Adam says**

GO FUCK YOURSELF, HEGEL.

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